

The Worst Generation

Comment

[Jett Rucker](#)

We in the West, particularly in the English-speaking areas most-exposed to the maunderings of Tom Brokaw,^[1] have heard much about “the greatest generation,” the cohort of Americans (and perhaps British, French, and maybe even Soviet in about that order) who grew up during the Great Depression and went on (at least, some of them, mostly the males) to fight in World War II against the Axis countries which, having lost that war, still today bear most of the blame for having started it, at least from the Western perspective that dominates not only the victorious countries, but also at least Germany, whose language and location expose it more to the victors’ domination than, say, Japan, which lost the same war to the same opponents.

This generation, among which might number, apparently, Tom Brokaw’s parents (Brokaw was born in 1940) grew up in a time of (government) monetarily triggered penury in which Europe was ineluctably swept along. Worst-fated among these European countries were Germany and Austria, to the latter of which’s *Credit Anstalt* a seminal role was subsequently allotted in “starting” that Depression in 1931. Therewith, perhaps, began that historico-propagandistic project that, from today’s remove, can clearly be seen to have assigned the blame for the subsequent miseries known as World War II to (Germany and) Austria.

The people who inhabited, and voted in, and paid taxes in, and sacrificed their sons to conscription in, those countries ... *they* must be the *worst* generation in—what? History? The world? Both? And the sons, too—and the daughters as well. What, indeed, might it require to elevate the cohort of the US population containing Brokaw’s parents to the sainthood of “the greatest generation?” It requires, in at least *some* places containing a great number of active, capable people, a *worst* generation—a generation given over, for some inscrutable reason, to evil, to harming humanity in general, if not, as in today’s environmentally sensitive times, the planet itself.

We, of any given society on the face of the earth, limn ourselves, each other, our parents, our parents’ generation, in terms that must demonize, revile, condemn, those of other societies that may be seen as having opposed whatever values we ascribe to the sanctified group, and in having done so, having relegated themselves to damnation—or at least some secular contrivance resembling damnation, if not damnation as it is known the religious context.

Religion. Perhaps we might discern a dynamic that we know best, in history, as the religious sentiment, in the protestations that elevate some people’s parents, as a group, to sainthood, as against the status accorded thereby to the parents of other people to that of ... demons.

This is nothing, neither more nor less, than the ideologues’ standard tactic of “divide and conquer.” *They* are demons; *we* (and/or our parents) are saints. Such are, since time immemorial, the devices of those who would gain power over us—power over our ability to produce economic value, over our sons’ (and daughters’) lives in time, and over our own thoughts and sentiments as may bear on those other matters.

There are, of course, institutions for gaining, keeping, and directing power over these factors (call them “minds and hearts”), and these are, in our regulated and law-driven societies, various entities known as “the government,” “the press,” “the academy,” “the church,” and they all communicate, as they must, with each other as to such matters as “the behavior of Allied soldiers” while invading and occupying, the motivations of our leaders, the motivations of *their* leaders, and finally, over *their* motivations themselves, as opposed, of course, to ours.

Given the ennobled/damned dichotomy ruling the same generation across both sides of the events in the period they shared, it might profit understanding to consider the experiences of the two opposing groups. While the Japanese (and Chinese, and Soviet) generations would qualify for a broader study of the subjects, concentration here is focused on the closer kin of Americans (British, French, etc.) vis-à-vis Germans (Austrians, Italians, etc.), the better to perceive the contrasts between otherwise-similar groups.

Start the comparison in 1919, the first year after the First World War ended. In the US, a wave of virtuous fervor engulfed the land—or the political process, at least—in the form of Prohibition. The Greatest Generation was going to start out sober, at least so far as the often-slighted Law was concerned. While the Americans were abstaining (or not) from alcohol, the Germans were struggling desperately to get a bite to eat, never mind the intoxicating beverages. This, of course, was because Britain and France maintained their wartime blockade of all shipping into and out of Germany quite in defiance of the Armistice that had been signed in November 1918. It only began to relax when the Treaty of Versailles was imposed in late June 1919. Thousands of the Worst Generation starved along with their parents, while the rest grew up in conditions of deprivation that may have poisoned their sentiments at least until the beginning of the subsequent world war.

Americans may have been too busy staying sober to take much note of the grim and unjust events occurring “over there.” Be that as it may, the same Treaty of Versailles that permitted the relaxation of the blockade imposed on Germans the millstone of compensating the victors of World War I for the costs of defeating them; never mind what costs they might have borne in the course of losing the conflict. Again, members of the Greatest Generation in the US were able to evade blame for the situation through not collecting any of the Versailles-dictated reparations; never mind that the 1917 entry of America into the War tipped the balance of the stalemate, enabling a decisive victory for the vengeful Western powers.



The carnage of the "Greatest Generation." Piles of corpses after the air strikes from the 13 and 14 February 1945 in Dresden

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Hardly a year after the end of Prohibition, the Greatest Generation sustained a new government-imposed deprivation that, like the one involving alcohol, was not shared by their European cousins, neither victors nor vanquished: the right to own gold. The US government decided that (all) gold was required for manipulating the value of the dollar vis-à-vis the currencies of other currencies, and so denied that medium (along with silver) to its own people for facilitating the economic exchanges by means of which they fed, sheltered, and clothed each other. The Depression, begun in 1931, marched right past this development and the Greatest Generation, despite a brief and illusory reprieve in 1936-37, remained impoverished not only in comparison with their European cousins (at least, the victors), but likewise in comparison with their own parents, the presumed progenitors of the Greatest Generation.

In Germany, punishing reparations payments to Britain and France (the blockaders, remember?) continued for fifteen years, until 1933, when Germany proclaimed its power—and need, and right—to repudiate the “debts” imposed upon it by the Versailles Diktat. From that time forward, Germany descended—or rose, depending on how one looks at it—into a command economy that favored, as all command economies do, long-term capital projects (selected and designed by the government, of course) and full employment even more than the leaf-raking and public-works projects so favored at the same time by the US government led by Franklin D. Roosevelt. While the Autobahn and the Hindenburg

much burnished Germany's image worldwide, and even heartened many of Germany's own citizens, it would seem in view of subsequent events to have in fact availed Germans and Germany but little, much as the WPA, the NRA and the rest of the alphabet soup never lifted Americans out of their economic quagmire.

But then, there was War. That did the job—at least for those it didn't kill, those it didn't maim, those it didn't starve to death, and those whose homes and cities it didn't obliterate. The Greatest Generation went off to war, leaving loved ones back home in peace and the false prosperity induced by various wartime exflations. Their opponents, the Worst Generation, also went off to war but eventually found themselves being driven back where they came from even while clouds of bombers obscured the sun while raining bombs and death down on the loved ones they had left behind. And whether they fought on the Eastern or the Western front, they knew their homeland was threatened from the other direction even as they fought the enemy on their own particular front.

Apparently, suffering, fear, and the desperate desire to save one's homeland from invasion do not impart Greatness to just any generation so engaged. Rather, it would seem, in Brokaw's words, to be a matter of Doing the Right Thing(s). Scourging the cities, treasures, homes, and lives of several great civilizations, from Tokyo to Berlin, even while introducing the world to the horrendous novelty of nuclear holocaust. Helping, indispensably, to erect the West's next great bogeyman, Communism, as the hegemon over eastern and central Europe, and shortly thereafter, over China. Beclouding the world with a penumbra of ICBM-borne thermonuclear devastation in Cold War during which most of us have spent our entire, fear-wracked lives. And even, by 1948, enabling the forcible insertion into the ever-volatile Middle East a new colony of dispossessed Europeans who, after clearing for themselves a suitable domain in several religions' Holy Lands, stole the means to project nuclear terror from yet another sore on a globe already afflicted with many such metastasizing tumors.

Yes, today's world is inevitably the product of that Greatest Generation in which the popular writer Brokaw would have at least some of us take such great pride. A better world is hardly to be imagined, is it?

The world imagined, or desperately—and vainly, in the event—hoped for by the defeated and decimated Worst Generation could never have been remotely as good, now, could it?

After all, what they were doing, for whatever reasons in their millions of dashed, dishonored hopes, must have been the Wrong Thing(s).

Tell yourself that, anyway. Again and again.

It's supposed to make you feel good.

Notes:

[1] Brokaw, Tom. *The Greatest Generation*. Random House, New York, 1997.

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